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Jason Fisher, ed., *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources: Critical Essays* Review by Faith Liu

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Jason Fisher, ed. *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources: Critical Essays*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011. 228 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7864-6482-1.

For those familiar with Sir George Dasent's bones-and-soup analogy for source criticism, famously used in Tolkien's 'On Fairy-stories',[1] Jason Fisher offers an even more gastronomically exciting ripper: he cites Tolkien comparing the source-hunting reader to a diner who, after a meal, 'uses an emetic, and sends the results for chemical analysis' (30). Given the acidity with which Tolkien treats the subject, it is little wonder that Fisher feels the need to create an 'apology for source criticism' (2) in gainsaying the author: in fact, he begins his collection with several valuable discussions of the range, limits, and methodology of the discipline, much needed in an already burgeoning field that too often exceeds its bounds. The rest of this largely enjoyable collection puts theory into practice, showcasing a variety of essays exploring, with a variety of results, the vast expanse of uncharted territory from which Tolkien may have drawn, from the depths of *King Solomon's Mines* to the planets above.

Tom Shippey, perhaps the most fitting and best equipped of all scholars to defend this field, has authored the collection's introduction; together with essays by Fisher and by E.L. Risden, they form a comprehensive argument for how to justify and subsequently judge sources and source criticism. Shippey acknowledges the many roots behind Tolkien's own distaste for source criticism, but contends that to divorce text from such rich and often esoteric context would deprive one of the opportunity to appreciate Tolkien's painstaking linguistic and literary genuineness. Shippey's own brilliant bit of philological analysis, unpacking a surprising amount of depth behind the humble name 'Butterbur', is proof enough of his abilities. E.L. Risden, seeking to declutter and demystify the practice of source study as a whole, asserts that, though the subject is indeed nebulous, it has a long and reputable history in Biblical and Shakespearean studies, among others. His informative look into the methods and intentions of source study conclude with a *caveat*: though finding sources is a largely inductive process, its results have value if – and only if – they meaningfully support a reading of the text. Fisher, too, is unflinching in weeding out the sloppy, pre-philological analyst, something for which Tolkien would surely be grateful. After making a rewarding comparison between Tolkien's and medieval authors' habit of being free with their treatment of sources, Fisher lays down the 'ground rules' for establishing a source: firstly, a causal rather than comparative relationship between the source and Tolkien's text; and secondly, a plausible argument as to how the source was used and why.

As Fisher acknowledges, 'most of the low-hanging fruit has long gone,' and scholars such as those featured in his collection have since 'been looking to the higher branches in the Tree of Tales' (37-38). Nicholas Birns's essay on Biblical mythopoeia and Mesopotamian mythology is on solid, if well-trodden, ground analysing Tolkien's 'calque' of the Biblical Creation, Fall, and Flood in *The Silmarillion*; his speculations as to its Mesopotamian roots, on

[1] 'We must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us, and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled.' Introduction to Dasent's *Popular Tales from the Norse* (xlvi), popularly requoted by Tolkien in "On Fairy-stories" (39).

the other hand, are both more intriguing and more tenuous. While understanding that Tolkien's words 'Erech' and 'Uruk' are also the Biblical and Mesopotamian names for the same city may add substantial nuance to their significance, Birns can say only that Tolkien was possibly familiar with the Assyriology department at Oxford, and much of the rest of his analysis is comparative rather than provably causal.

The same can be said about several of the collection's later contributions. Judy Ann Ford's essay on William Caxton's *The Golden Legend,* a collection of medieval hagiographies, attempts to prove that Tolkien drew from Christian tradition as well as pagan legendaria. However, when the only known connection between Tolkien and Caxton's book is a single entry in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, and when the magical objects and events that Ford points to are generic enough to have come from sources outside of *The Golden Legend* (men who can control the weather, sending the dead into battle, etc.), a claim of 'sufficiently parallel' (139) is not enough. Mark T. Hooker's essay on the novels of John Buchan, one of Tolkien's contemporaries, does somewhat better: although Hooker seems to rely on the sheer number of parallels to make his point, and although several of these parallels are easily dismissed as coincidence of fact or of intent (a mutual interest in pre-Roman Britain, giving semantically resonant names to similarly employed minor characters), there are a few gems scattered about his work. The strongest of these is *Huntingtower*'s grocer-turned-burglar Dickson McCunn*:* though several scholars have already remarked upon his similarity to Bilbo Baggins, Hooker's eye for detail brings it into full bloom. Beyond that, however, the works of Buchan may elicit, as Hooker says, 'a sense of *déjà vu* in the reader who has met Tolkien first' (173), but not much more.

Far more grounded are Kristine Larsen's essay on the Classical roots of the story of Eärendil and Elwing and Miryam Librán-Moreno's study tackling narrative parallels between the history of Middle-Earth and the barbarian histories of Late Antiquity. Larsen not only draws eleven common threads between Eärendil and Elwing's tale and the Greek myth of Ceyx and Alcyone, but also identifies their counterparts in the planets Venus and Mercury, drawing on her own background as a physicist and astronomer. Larsen traces the Ceyx and Alcyone myth through its various renditions in Ovid, Chaucer, de Machaut, and Gower, most of which Tolkien would have known and read; likewise, she follows the story of Eärendil and Elwing through the various drafts of *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth*, unpacking the thematic and revisionary intricacies of which details from the Greek myth Tolkien retained and which he altered. Tolkien's acute interest in astronomy and meteorology are also brought to light, as Larsen reveals detail after detail pointing to his incorporation of planetary and weather phenomena and superstition within his own mythology.

Miryam Librán-Moreno's essay requires little proof that Tolkien was familiar with Constantinople and its neighbours; her own extensive knowledge of Byzantium's political history, culture attitudes, and relationships with the surrounding peoples is put to good use as she lays out a dense, but enjoyably readable, series of parallels pointing to Byzantium as an inspiration for the city of Gondor. Although the connections she draws do not necessarily follow chronological order or a one-to-one correlation – Attila and Denethor, Charlemagne and Aragorn – the real histories form a library from which Tolkien drew to lend depth and nuance to his own texts. Librán-Moreno finds additional evidence in *The Book of Lost Tales* and in a poem Tolkien wrote in response to Charles Williams' 'The Vision of the Empire': in Tolkien's poem, Constantinople represents corruption, worldliness, pride, and intolerance of other cultures, and in *The Lord of the Rings,* these elements are reincarnated in Late Gondor. Librán-Moreno's analysis, which identifies the Rohirrim as literary descendants of the Goths, is then drawn into Thomas Honegger's essay, which challenges Tolkien's disavowal of the Rohirrim as Anglo-Saxons. While Honegger concedes that Rohan's historical relationship with Gondor and its cultural attachment to horses is reminiscent of the Goths, he argues that it is the rich literary tradition of the Anglo-Saxon warrior, rather than the nearly vanished Gothic society and literature, which informs the culture of the Rohirrim. From Tolkien's use of Old English

as the root of Rohan's language, to the echoes of Beowulf's arrival at Heorot in the arrival of Gandalf and company at Meduseld, the world of the Rohirrim is permeated with the literary Anglo-Saxon's 'northern heroic spirit' (126).

John D. Rateliff tackles H. Rider Haggard's *She,* one of the few childhood favourites that Tolkien acknowledged by name, and whose vivid characters and settings, Rateliff contends, Tolkien continued to admire and draw from in his adulthood. Many of the parallels Rateliff finds – between She and Galadriel, between the people of Kôr and the Númenóreans, between each writer's ideas of a 'limited immortality' – are not only striking, but also ripe with thematic resonances. Similarly valuable is Diana Pavlac Glyer and Josh B. Long's look at Tolkien's own life in 'Biography as Source: Niggles and Notions'. As the title suggests, Glyer and Long pick at the low-hanging fruit of 'Leaf by Niggle' and others of Tolkien's more personal literature, though in greater detail, and to greater effect, than usual. In meticulously tracing Tolkien's self-references chronologically through his body of work, from Alboin to Ramer to Niggle to Smith, Glyer and Long point to many of the one-to-one correlations with people in Tolkien's own life, some of which dissolve as characters grow into their own, and others of which continue to yield piercing insights, from fiction to reality and back again.

It is refreshing to see, in what is already a thriving community, a discussion of why and how to go about Tolkienian source study, and rarely is it undertaken with such attention to detail and demand for high standards. Though the collection could use a conclusion (one is otherwise left with the melancholy aftertaste of Glyer and Long's discussion of *Smith of Wootton Major*), and more attractive cover design, *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources* is, on the whole, a triumph: a collection accessible to both the enthusiast and the academic, with extensive footnotes and bibliographies providing ample food for the reader seeking to go beyond. The work of these scholars is not chemical analysis of predigested dinners; rather, it is the attempt to unlock the secrets of an old family recipe. Some attempts bring new insight into a dish, while others indulge in more insubstantial speculation, but all serve to promote a greater appreciation for the discipline, for the dish, and for the chef himself.

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